

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT KORACH

The Entire Nation is Holy

By Rav Yair Kahn

I. The Aftermath of the Rebellion

The story of Korach's rebellion is a fascinating drama, full of passion and intrigue. Although the Torah is grudgingly silent regarding the background and details of these events, *Chazal*, utilizing various nuances and hints in the biblical texts, managed to weave together a tale that reflects both human realities and philosophical dilemmas.

In sharp contrast to this narrative brevity, the aftermath of the rebellion, which at first glance appears insignificant, is treated with surprising detail. This epilogue is quite uncharacteristic of biblical narrative. The Torah records numerous occasions when the Jewish People failed and were subsequently reprimanded and sometimes even punished, but at that point, the episode ends. In contrast, the story of Korach inexplicably seems to linger on. It is only after Korach and his followers are destroyed, the people continue to complain, bringing disaster upon themselves.

Let us consider one of the major points of contention – the authority of Moshe Rabbeinu. In response to the challenge presented by Korach, the divine sanction of Moshe's rule was clearly established when the earth opened up its mouth to swallow Datan and Aviram. If this issue has been resolved, how are we to understand the people's subsequent verbal assault on Moshe and Aharon: "YOU murdered God's people" (17:6)? The use of the term "you" in this context indicates that Moshe and Aharon were being held personally responsible for the deaths of the insurgents. Did the people still believe that Moshe was acting out of personal vengeance? Were they totally oblivious to the most essential message indicated by the divine sign they had just witnessed: "Hereby you will know that God sent me to perform all these acts, as they were not [done] of my own mind" (16:28)? Was the mouth of the Earth, which our Sages say was created at twilight on the Friday of creation, created for naught? Let us not ignore the fact that most of the casualties occurred during the plague that took place only at this point, and not during the actual rebellion!

However, the story does not end even at this point. The Korach saga continues, as the people once again turn to Moshe, complaining in the wake of the plague:

Behold, we die, we perish, we are all perishing! Everyone who approaches the sanctuary of God dies; have we stopped dying? (17:27-28)

This complaint is enigmatic. Did the people really believe that God killed at random? Were they unaware that Korach and his followers had committed a grave sin? Moreover, why do they continue to complain after seeing the tragic consequences of their initial complaint? Was one plague insufficient? Why don't they learn from their mistakes?

Based on the above, it seems obvious that far more emphasis should be placed on the events that followed the rebellion. The Torah is trying to draw our attention to this section of the story, and a complete understanding of the Korach rebellion cannot be attained without deciphering the significance of the epilogue.

II. Philosophical Skepticism or Emotional Reaction

In my opinion, these events implicitly address a basic problem raised by Korach that was never explicitly treated: "For the entire congregation is holy and God dwells in their midst; why then do you raise yourselves above the congregation of God?" (16:3). Regardless of the impurity of Korach's personal motives, the problem he raised seems legitimate – the question of equality. This question is never specifically addressed, nor adequately resolved. Although we trust Moshe's assertion that Korach was interested only in his personal status (see 16:10), we are nevertheless left to ponder the Jewish caste system that separates *kohanim* from the rest of the nation.

Let us take a closer look at the events leading to the plague. The people blamed Moshe and Aharon for the death of Korach and his followers. But was Moshe Rabbeinu completely in error when he claimed, "Hereby you shall know that God sent me" (16:28)? As we mentioned before, it is difficult to assume that the people were totally oblivious to the divine proof indicating that Moshe and Aharon were merely implementing God's will.

I believe that the people WERE convinced by the divine sign. Korach's claim that Moshe was not representing God's will was laid to rest when the earth miraculously swallowed the insurgents. The people's argument was not rooted in philosophical skepticism; rather, it was a human reaction generated by sorrow and pain. Devastated by the death of public leaders, friends and relatives, they turned to Moshe and Aharon full of grief: "Was there no other way to prove your point? Did all these people have to be destroyed? Are we short of orphans and widows?" It was an emotional outburst, not a rational argument. However, if my interpretation is correct, the severity of God's response seems incomprehensible: "Remove yourselves from amongst this congregation and I will destroy them in an instant" (17:10).

It would be instructive to glance at a similar divine reaction, which is the precursor of this one. When Korach goes to the sanctuary with his two hundred and fifty followers, he gathers the entire nation to witness the outcome. God's severe response to the nation's curiosity is startling: "Separate from amongst this congregation and I will destroy them in an instant" (16:21). Again, we find God's response totally out of proportion to the severity of the infraction. It is true that the people should not have harbored even the slightest doubt regarding the divine nature of Moshe's authority, but is this curiosity punishable by death? Although in the end Moshe managed to deflect the danger of destruction, we are left to ponder the significance of the threat.

At this point, I would like to suggest an approach radically different from the one assumed until now. The plague was not the deserved punishment for a specific sin; rather, it was the almost inevitable result of a new situation created by the rebellion. Korach attacked the institution of *kehuna* (priesthood). He claimed that the entire nation was holy and therefore there was no need for a separate priestly class. According to his argument, anyone could enter the sanctuary and bring the incense offering. Although *Benei Yisrael* did not challenge Moshe's authority, they nonetheless identified with Korach's argument. They did not understand why they could not fully participate in the Sanctuary worship. After all, were they not a "kingdom of priests" (*Shemot* 19:6)? Why should they be considered "*zarim*" (strangers), who may not enter the Temple? Why should a barrier separate them from the Sanctuary?

However, this barrier was not unilaterally imposed upon *Benei Yisrael* by God; it was erected with the implicit consent of the people, when *machane Yisrael* was set up. Once *Bnei Yisrael* accepted the premise of Korach's argument and rejected the barrier separating the sacred and the mundane, they found themselves faced with a new situation – the barrier was abolished. There was no longer any division between the people and the Sanctuary. The line separating "the camp of the *Shekhina*" from "the Levite camp" and "the Israelite camp" became blurred. The entire camp became enveloped within the context of the *Mishkan* and the presence of the *Shekhina*.

Of course, being in the presence of the Almighty, as it were, is quite demanding. Behavior deemed acceptable under usual circumstances, becomes intolerable within the context of the Sanctuary. As it is written in *Kohelet*, "Take heed when you walk in the house of Hashem" (4:17). Normal human reactions of anger and grief must be suppressed; emotional outbursts are unacceptable.

When Nadav and Avihu were destroyed, Aharon and his remaining sons were commanded not to mourn:

Let not the hair of your heads go loose, neither rend your clothes, lest you die ... but let your brethren, the whole house of Yisrael, bewail the burning which Hashem has kindled. And you shall not go out from the

door of the tent of meeting, lest you die; for the anointing oil of Hashem is upon you. (*Vayikra* 10:6-7)

Since they were in the *Mishkan*, Aharon and his remaining sons must suppress the basic human emotion of mourning. Similarly, the *Kohen Gadol* cannot leave the sanctuary to attend the funeral services of even his closest relatives (see *Vayikra* 21:11-12).

When the people gathered to witness the outcome of the Korach-Moshe controversy, they did not necessarily harbor deep-rooted doubts regarding the divine nature of Moshe's authority. Perhaps they were driven by simple human curiosity. It is even possible that they were rooting for Korach not due to wavering faith, but merely because it is human nature to root for the underdog. Even if we concede that *Bnei Yisrael* identified with Korach's populist campaign slogan, were they cognizant of the philosophical ramifications? Weren't they merely acting human?

The answer is that human frailties are inexcusable within God's presence. While standing within the framework of the *Mishkan*, which now enveloped the entire camp, human behavior must be impeccable. Had Moshe not pleaded on behalf of the nation, a lethal plague would have devastated the camp.

Mourning the death of Korach and his followers, the people approached Moshe and complained. Their reaction was understandable as an emotional outburst of grief, sorrow and pain. They did not challenge Moshe's authority; they merely let off steam. Again, their reaction, though acceptable under normal situations, was intolerable once the barriers had collapsed. The presence of the *Shekhina* demands restraint and self-control (see *Vayikra* 10:3); there is no room within the *mishkan* for such passionate outbursts of anger. Once the people protested, there was nothing left for Moshe to do but to send Aharon to stop the spread of the plague.

III. The Final Stage

In sharp contrast with the argumentative tone of the emotional outburst that led to the plague, the complaint that followed seems like a pathetic whimper. Frustrated and desperate, the people return to Moshe and say, "Behold, we are all dying!" (17:27). After the plague, they finally understood the severity of their situation. They realized that the plague was not a punishment for sin, but a result of the total breakdown of barriers that they had brought upon themselves – "Everyone who approaches the Sanctuary of God dies; have we stopped dying?" (ibid. 28).

After initially identifying with Korach's campaign and rejecting the barriers separating the Sanctuary from the nation, the people are now ready to appreciate why division is necessary. They understand that, to a certain extent, "a holy nation" is a contradiction in terms. Sanctity demands separation, a departure from the mundane. Frailties typical of the human condition are incommensurate with holiness. Normal societal conditions are

replete with passion and competition, arguments and jealousy. Although these are unavoidable within a normal human framework, they are intolerable in the presence of God. Nationhood and holiness appear to be mutually exclusive.

Now, the time is ripe to re-introduce the institution of *kehuna*. A Sanctuary for the entire nation can be established within their midst on one condition – there must be barriers. A *Mishkan* can be established within a human context; however, the priests who are to serve within it must be separated from the mundane routine of life, which is full of tension and strife. The remainder of the nation can continue to lead a normal life, and nevertheless the *Mishkan* in their midst becomes the focus which invests their life with direction and meaning.

This, in fact, is God's response to the people's second complaint:

And Hashem said to Aharon: "You and your children and your father's house with you shall bear the iniquity of the Sanctuary and you and your children with you shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood ... and to the consecrated vessels and the altar they will not approach and neither they nor you will perish." (18:1-3)

Bnei Yisrael finally appreciate the institution of *kehuna*. They finally understand why barriers are necessary for the realization of that great vision – to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. At this point, the institution of *kehuna* could finally be re-established, and the barriers rejected due to Korach's rebellion could be rebuilt with the entire nation's consent. Upon the ruins of a fragmented society divided by a sense of inequality, a harmonious community based upon separation of roles and mutual respect was built.

IV. When Did the Rebellion Take Place

At the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*, we read:

But the Leviim shall pitch round about the Tabernacle of the Testimony, that there be no *ketzef* (wrath) upon the *eida* (congregation) of the *benei Yisrael*. (1:53)

When the division of the various camps was initially established, it was to prevent *ketzef* from the *eida*. When Hashem threatens to destroy *Yisrael* after Korach gathers the entire *eida*, Moshe and Aharon plead with Hashem not to have *ketzef* on the *eida* because of the transgressions of one person (16:22). After the people complain and the plague begins, Moshe sends Aharon into the *eida* because the plague has begun due to Hashem's *ketzef* (17:11). After the people complain for the second time and lament their sorry condition, the division of the *machane* is re-established and the *Leviim* are charged with guarding the holy places so that *Yisrael* should not be struck by *ketzef* (18:5).

The Ibn Ezra notes that Korach attacked the structure that was established at the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*. Applying the principle that the

Torah does not necessarily correspond to chronological order, he argues that the Korach rebellion preceded the *meraglim*. The Ramban counters that Datan and Aviram's attack on Moshe ("You have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness... Moreover you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards" [16:13-14]) is a clear reference to the decree following the *chet ha-meraglim*.

A straightforward reading of the Torah supports the position of the Ramban, that the rebellion took place after the *meraglim*. However, the Ibn Ezra correctly notes that the issue at stake is the original structure of the *machane*, which was established at the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*. Perhaps Korach was unable to attack Moshe as long as he was popular and success seemed just around the corner. The devastating decree of the *meraglim* afforded the opportunity to attack.

The understanding that Korach attacked the *machane* structure established at the beginning of *Bamidbar* is significant in appreciating the flow of the *sefer*. In our study of *Sefer Bamidbar*, we have traced the development of the multifaceted *machane*. We began with its birth, so full of promise and hope, as described in the opening chapters. We began to note troublesome signs of deterioration as *Bnei Yisrael* began their epic journey from Sinai to Canaan. We watched in horror as the *machane* collapsed upon the return of the *meraglim*. Until this point, the decline affected the masses as well as the political leadership; the institutions of *kehuna* and *leviya* somehow remained intact. Here, we witness the collapse of these institutions as well.

Thus, our *parasha* describes the continuation of the disintegration of the *machane*. This process, which began in *Bamidbar* 11 and peaks with the episode of the spies, continues with the rejection of *kehuna* and *leviya*. However, *Parashat Korach* is also the turning point. *Kehuna* and *leviya* are re-established, and the process of rebuilding has begun. In next week's shiur, we will continue to trace this rebuilding process.